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ABSTRACT

"La dictee" is an effective, time-tested strategy for teaching writing based on the French method of writing from dictation. In addition to writing, "la dictee" incorporates thinking, listening, and speaking skills; relies on literature to provide instructional material; and stresses the interrelationships between reading and writing. The teacher first selects a well-written work and briefly describes to the class its setting, plot, and characters. Next, the teacher reads a selected paragraph aloud to the class and discusses its meaning. The teacher then reads each sentence of the paragraph and repeats it as the students write. The students can correct their copies of the paragraph as the teacher explains special features of punctuation or spelling that may have caused difficulties. The corrected copy of the dictation can be used as a study guide for each student. Follow up activities can also be used in "la dictee," such as repeating the same passage to challenge students to perfect their writing ability or to reinforce the skills learned from the passage, exploring synonyms appropriate for the passage to expand students' vocabulary, and having students retell the passage to develop their oral language. Students can also benefit from responding in writing to questions raised by the passage. (HTH)

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LA DICTÉE: AN EFFECTIVE METHOD FOR TEACHING WRITING

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As we strive to improve student writing, teachers at all levels of instruction are crying for help in teaching composition more effectively. We have worked together to clarify philosophies of instruction, to develop more efficient ways of evaluating writing products, and to amass a quantity of ideas for motivating student writing. Yet, we still need a more structured, systematic method of teaching writing that will ensure growth and be stimulating to the learner. We need a method that can be followed by any teacher with reasonable success.

La dictée, an exciting, time-tested strategy for teaching writing, offers an extensive, systematic method of using dictation to teach composition that English teachers, as well as teachers of other subjects, can use effectively. "Ecrire sous la dictée"--to write from dictation--is described by Rollo Brown in How the French Boy Learns to Write,[1] a classic study first published by Harvard University in 1915. Brown undertook this extensive study of instructional practices in France because he noted that the French student has "for a long time borne the reputation of being a good writer." By studying French methods of instruction, he hoped to aid teachers of English in improving the teaching of composition, and thereby, to improve the writing ability of American students.

As I reread this classic work, I was intrigued by the possibilities for employing la dictée as a basic method in elementary and high school writing programs. I developed the idea, adapting freely, and expanded the methodology until it fit my own theory of teaching language arts holistically. La dictée, as I describe it in this article, is a method that focuses on teaching writing,

[1] Reprinted by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1963.

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but it also incorporates thinking, listening, and speaking skills; relies on literature to provide stimulating instructional material; and stresses the interrelationships between reading and writing. La dictée is a method that integrates language arts instruction.

Instructional Procedures

La dictée is a planned presentation that requires careful selection of the dictation passage, knowledge of the literature from which the passage is taken, and development of appropriate followup exercises. The selection and presentation of the literature make this dictation method unique. The kinds of followup activities employed determine the extent of learning that will take place. This list of procedures explains how la dictée is used in the classroom as applied to a specific example:

1. Select the literature to be used. According to your purpose and the needs of your students, choose fiction or nonfiction, a trade (library) book or textbook, but do select prose that is well-written, worthy of being emulated, for example:

Dragonwings by Laurence Yep (Harper, available in paperback).

2. Introduce the book and author to your students. A book suitable for preteens and teenage readers, Dragonwings was a Newbery Honor Book in 1976. It was written by a California author who was inspired by the account of a Chinese immigrant who built a flying machine in 1909. A sensitive novel, it provides historical information about the Chinese American's cultural heritage, and therefore, is pertinent for the social studies curriculum.

Read the book before presenting it to the students, of course, You might introduce the book by reading the first few paragraphs, beginning: "Ever since I can remember, I had wanted to know about the Land of the Golden Mountain, but my mother had never wanted to talk about it." Explain that the main character, Moon Shadow, lives in China with his mother and grandmother, but his father, Windrider, lives in San Francisco's Chinatown. Fascinating information about

the writing of this book is available in "Writing Dragonwings" by Laurence Yep,[2] which could be read to junior and senior high school students.

3. Select one paragraph as the dictation passage. Choose a paragraph that contains stimulating information. Also, examine the sentence structures and the conventions of spelling and punctuation to see that they are appropriately challenging, yet not too difficult for the class. I chose the following paragraph from Dragonwings because it describes an important decision, and demonstrates the use of the semicolon, and shows students the difference between a common and a proper noun:

> Mother had talked quite a bit about him and so had Grandmother; but that too was not the same. They were speaking about a young man who had lived in the Middle Kingdom, not a man who had endured the hardships and loneliness of living in the demon land. I knew he made kites; but as marvelous as his kites were, he and I could not spend the rest of our lives flying kites. I was afraid of the Golden Mountain, and yet my father, who lives there, wanted me to join him. I only knew that there was a certain rightness in life--the feeling you got when you did something the way you knew you should. I owed it to Father to obey him in everything--even if it meant going to such a fearful place as the Golden Mountain. And really, how really frightening could it be if Hand Clap wanted to go back? I turned to Mother and Grandmother. "I want to go," I said.

Before reading the paragraph to the students, I explained what led up to the event described.

4. Read the selection aloud and discuss the meaning. After reading the paragraph to the class, I asked questions designed to clarify the meaning, for instance:

a. Who are the characters participating in this scene?

b. Who is Hand Clap?

c. Who is telling the story?

d. What is the fearful place, The Golden Mountain? How did it get that name?

e. Why did Moon Shadow decide he would go to The Golden Mountain?

5. Dictate the paragraph to the students. Read a sentence while students listen. Then, repeat the sentence slowly as they write it. To teach good

[2] Yep, Laurence. "Writing Dragonwings." Reading Teacher, January, 1977. Also reprinted in Multicultural Teaching by Pamela and Iris Tiedt. Allyn & Bacon, 1979.

listening skills, do not repeat more than the two times described. Have students correct their copies of the paragraph.

6./ After dictating the full passage, read it aloud slowly as you explain special features of punctuation or spelling that may have caused difficulty. You may choose to have several students write each sentence on the chalkboard so that students see the full sentence as you discuss it. (The use of the dash in the sample passage is less common so that few students will have used that punctuation; you may choose to use a comma.) The corrected copy of the dictation will be used as a study guide and is placed in the student's notebook.

This procedure should be repeated once a week or every other week depending on the number of followup activities you plan.

Extending La Dictée Presentations

An integral part of la dictée is the followup activity which can focus on developing specific writing skills. One or more activities can be developed as described in these examples.

1. Repetition of the same dictation. Dictating the same passage a second time is recommended to challenge students to perfect their ability to write the sentences without errors. Repeating the same passage a third or fourth time after some time has passed will reinforce the students' knowledge of the writing skills exemplified in a particular passage.

2. Exploring sentence patterns. Choose one or more sentences from the passage to serve as models that students can imitate. Show them how to identify the structural features of a sentence that form a pattern, thus:

_____ had _____ and so had _____; but that _____.

Then, students can use this pattern with which to construct new sentences like this one:

John had lied and so had Mildred; but that didn't make any difference now.

3. Expanding vocabulary. Use words from the dictated passage as the basis for vocabulary study. Discuss the meaning of such words as marvelous or loneliness, suggesting other words that we associate with these concepts. Have students explore synonyms for common words used in the passage, thus:

had talked
had described
had discussed
had told
had spoken
had shared
had conversed

Discuss how the grammatical structure of the sentence would have to be changed if the verbs listed were used instead of the one the author chose.

4. Developing oral language. Students can retell the happening described in this passage, trying to include as much detail as possible. They might also act out the scene expanding the dialogue as they deem appropriate.

5. Responding to literature through writing. This passage suggests a number of topics with which young readers can identify, for example:

> How would you feel if you were Moon Shadow? Would you have made the same decision?
>
> Write the dialogue that you think might have taken place between Moon Shadow and his father, Windrider, when they met in San Francisco.

In addition to the examples given here, you might work with sentence combining, the Cloze technique, or the Venn diagram. Each selection will suggest varied kinds of language arts activities that evolve directly out of la dictée procedures.

Summary

La dictée is a method that integrates language arts instruction. Students listen and think as the passage is presented, and they participate in oral discussion designed to enhance comprehension. Then, they listen and write as they become involved directly with a segment of the literature selection.

Many students will be motivated to read the book from which the passage comes or the instructor may plan to read the book aloud or to incorporate it in the reading program. La dictée provides structure for the writing program and overcomes some of the artificiality of beginning efforts to write. Spelling and the mechanics are presented in the context of a fluent passage, and students are exposed to the mature syntax of an adult writer. Through this approach students become more conscious of words and how the good writer uses them. They are guided in learning more about language as they develop an "ear for language" against which they will continue to test their own writing. La dictée is an efficient and effective way of presenting a systematic, well-organized writing program that ensures growth for the individual student.

Note from the author: La dictée is now being tested in in grades 6-9 across the country. If you would like to participate in this study, write to: Dr. Iris M. Tiedt, Director, South Bay Writing Project, San Jose State University, English Department, San Jose CA 95192.

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